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Spiritual Immigration

Carmen Hernandez

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Spiritual Immigration

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THESIS PROPOSAL

The thesis presents my personal and external interpretations of people who have been directly or indirectly involved with the immigration process. First, each migration consists of unique elements based on the culture and circumstances of the immigrant. Personal experiences are important to the development of this theme. Individual perceptions of the sea as a migratory vehicle are used to interpret these unique elements. Second, the theme is developed from a humanistic viewpoint. Finally, theories such as the search for Utopia and historical events like the Cuban mass migration to the US are utilized to help understand the immigration process. These paintings were created to expose the viewer to this social issue, which continues to affect our society, as seen from my spiritual and humanistic perspective.

My Technique pursues expressiveness through light, figurative forms, and color. Inspirations are expressed through integrating my use of the vocabulary of color with the representation of different immigrant experiences. The canvas measurements expand the vision of the theme, which is complemented by color iconography, and the specific sensitivity of each painting. These techniques help me explore and interpret a major socio-political issue of our society, immigration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to many people for their help in developing this thesis. Special thanks go to my thesis committee composed of Philip Bornarth, Ed Miller, and Robert Heischman for providing me with their knowledge and perspective of the visual arts and, moreover, for the humanistic sensibility they presented me and the theme of this thesis. Thank you for your patience. I also have to give thanks to Thomas Lightfoot, Luvon Shepard, and Robert Cole for their involvement in my thesis and for believing in my work and me throughout my two years of work at Rochester Institute of Technology.

Inevitably, I could not make my thesis without the help of hundreds of people, immigrants and non-immigrants that I met and interviewed along the process of this thesis. Many of them trusted me beyond reasonable limits, in part I supposed, because they were so eager to tell their stories. Some came to America from countries where it could be very dangerous to talk to strangers, especially those bearing notebooks and tape recorders. Nonetheless, they confided in me, opened up their hearts (in quite a few cases also their homes) and shared their fears and aspirations without concern for what the results might be. I will always remember them because they were my teachers in life and my inspiration. Lastly, but not less important, I want to give my thanks to my husband Rene, to whom this thesis is dedicated, Because without his patience and love this thesis wouldn't have been possible.

Thank you everyone for making possible that this dream has come true!

INTRODUCTION

*Now I find myself far from the country where I was born.
Oh, the parents I love, how they have suffered for me!
My poor little mother, she gave me advice
And with tears in her eyes, she gave me her blessings.*

*Now don't cry, anymore, little mother, I know I will suffer;
Let me take my chances, I'm going in search of my future.*

*I also left my little love, to whom I promised to return,
Well, I know she will wait for me, God has granted me this.
I would like to be like the birds and in only one flight
Cross those valleys and mountains and arrive to my love ones.*

*Miraculous little virgin, who knows my suffering,
On my knees I will come to see you if you grant me return.¹*

I started with this poem because it summarizes, to a great extent, the main theme of my thesis: immigration. This is the vehicle of my inspiration in developing one of the major socio-political issues of our society. This will be achieved through the vocabulary of color; shape and canvas measurements, which will help me, expand the vision of iconography carrying specific sensitivity in each painting. The historical events, theories, and personal testimonies have been utilized in support of the concept of my thesis work. Each migration consists of unique elements based on the culture and circumstances of the immigrants. For this reason, personal experiences are important in the development of this thesis. The content of my artwork would help the viewer learn more about this social issue, which continues to affect society, presented through my spiritual and humanistic perspective.

¹ Marilyn P. Davis. Mexican Voices/American Dreams. Henry Holt & Company, N.Y., 1990. Page 142.

My artwork is made in response to the societies surrounding me. These societies are constantly feeding my life providing me new inspirations for the creation of my artwork. They provide me daily life situations that I transform into art. Without societies, my thesis could have never been born; they are my source of inspiration. I am dealing with certain existential realities of immigration like political oppression and the side-effects this situation causes on the human being such as the quest for freedom, excess violence, corruption, hunger, etc. At the same time, I want my work to carry utopian thoughts that just the paint and canvas allow me to express such as dreams, with the transcendence of time and space, using the fantasy as an extension of reality. Moreover, you will appreciate certain utopian aspirations representing an imaginative escape from the oppressive conditions of the present. What appears as an escape from a particular stage of the history of immigration changed more toward spiritual immigration in a metaphorical way. This utopian reflex may also apply to aesthetic constructs.

Through my palette, technique and conceptualizing, one can appreciate the social interaction within the artwork. I will describe, interpret, and judge my paintings. These paintings reflect issues expressed through a variety of testimonies about immigration and present influences from the modernist and postmodernist eras.

CONCEPT OF THE ARTWORK

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the ideal of self-determination fostered by the French Revolution and spread by Napoleon helped spawn a revolutionary spirit across much of Europe. "In 1848, the year in which Marx and Engels published the Communist Manifesto, revolutions broke out in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Venice, Milan, Parma and Rome."² Through inspired by different circumstances, these revolts shared a common ideology centered on a growing belief in democracy, a sense of individual freedom, and an emerging social awareness. The revolutions crystallized questions of class and pressed on the public consciousness the miseries as well as the power of the laboring masses. These revolutions, despite limited degrees of success, gave rise to the socialist ideology that increasingly affected western political, social and cultural history.

It is interesting that the artists of that era established values, conventions and norms that brought validity to new themes and new approaches. The artists' subject matter was their daily life, nature, the poor and the oppressed. Their work has been a vehicle to understanding the issues of that period. Through their images and thoughts we have learned not only about art history but also about the history of the world.

In 1997, during my spring quarter, I was invited to a Latin Party in Rochester where I met a family composed of Carlos, Thai and their daughter Lourdes. They seemed to be quiet people until a friend introduced me to them. Their accent gave away their nationality: Cubans. The conversation

² Foster, Arnold W., Judith R. Blau. Art and Society: Readings in the Sociology of the arts. Albany State University of New York Press, New York. 1989. Page. 52.

turned to the political aspects of Cuba and their decision to come definitively to the US. I felt their nervousness as they spoke to me, a stranger in their world, about this issue. But, at the same time, this nervousness could not match the risks that they took in trying to come to the US. Their journey was taken in a raft made up of a large tractor tire tube wrapped with frayed strips of burlap and ropes, bamboo tubes and fishnet to protect the occupants from the scalding heat of the rubber baking under the Caribbean sun. Ironically, they were not fearful of risking their lives in a rickety raft in the sea, which carried thirteen people, but they were afraid to tell me stories about Cuba.

Their stories made me think more and more about the immigration theme and the way my paintings will portray it. This family encouraged me to learn and to be sensitive to this problem that involves the entire world. My thesis work is about the immigrants around the world and their vulnerability associated with certain “power” that, in most of the cases, is evoked from a “political power”. Art is a tool, and can serve a social function that helps shape a shaper of political attitudes and its function is social. I consider myself a very socially concerned artist; although not all my paintings shows traces of being political paintings. Perhaps it is due to the way I mask and involve the use of my techniques, shapes, and color palette, which at the end provides a contrast with the meaning and concept behind the artwork. My artwork is not directed to lazy viewers because most of my artwork carries a metaphorical meaning, providing the viewer with many kinds of reflections. This can be appreciated in one of my paintings, *The hope of a Metamorphosis*, which shows explicitly my political view through strong images that provides the viewer with a dramatic story. Also, *Through the Sea*, presents one hundred thirty three paintings, each portraying the political concept. I pursued this theme with a remarkable consistency, determined to forge a personal statement that activates both social and aesthetic concerns. My variations on this topic have evolved from a highly subjective approach, centered on my individual skills as an artist, to the external world.

Up to a certain point, my thesis transmits certain utopic ideals, that as an artist, I can portrait in my artwork using brushes and canvases so that the society can appreciate it.

Throughout the research of my thesis, I heard and read a lot of stories of immigrants from different places around the world. They have been seeking freedom; a freedom and success that can be reached through what they call the political utopia: “democracy”. Most of the immigrants that I interviewed came to the United States to get this that they call “democracy”. I understand that many countries around the world do not of a “democratic life” such as China, Cuba, Haiti, to name a few. But what is “democracy”? Do we live in a real “democracy”? Many people risks their lives crossing borders, rafting, leaving their loves one in their countries to reach this “democracy” that the United States can provide them.

Many ideas come to my mind when I think of a real democracy, such as freedom, responsibility, future, and values. I have to recognize, with deep sorrow, how anti-democratic the American culture is. When I talk about the American culture, I am including my country, Puerto Rico, which is also controlled by a “democratic” political system. For me the democracy in this political system is just “representative”, is not real, and is like a mirage. I say this because throughout history, the white male has represented the democracy in the United States; a woman or a black man has never controlled it. Therefore, we have never experienced a real democracy and who knows if we ever will.

What kind of democracy do we have? The system gets its decisions and “laws” to “satisfy” a specific group without bearing in mind the voice of each person whom comprises this nation. The “democratic” system has not asked for our opinions and/or position about war or nuclear warfare. Perhaps the soldiers that are being sent to war do not want to fight and kill other human beings.

This is not democracy! As you can see, this “democracy” has manipulated our life with the immorality to remind us that we are living in a “democracy”.

In a real democracy, we must take in consideration the expression of every human being, every particular class, gender, ethnic specificity, and racial division. Real democracy, in this time, favors the restructuring of political, social and cultural institutions in ways that permit broad popular control over them. This means creating forms of self-management in all major political, economical, and cultural spheres of society, restructuring our social relations. I still think that in a democracy, the goal should be towards less division of labor and nationality and towards more shared projects and decisions. These issues encourage me to talk about them in my art.

My work evokes the reality principle, which gives the everyday world its most determined appearances and makes those appearances symptomatic of the truth of the world as such. “Art provides a salvation from the increasing pressures of theoretical and practical rationalism. With this claim to a redemptory function, art begins to compete directly with salvation, religion... the refusal of modern men [sic] to assume responsibility for moral judgements tends to transform judgements of taste (‘in poor taste’ instead of ‘reprehensible’). The inaccessibility of appeal from aesthetic judgements excludes discussion.”³

In other words, the political art had to encourage the spectator to be self-reflexive and, therefore, to raise their critical awareness of representations in society. Such representations appeared to offer a “truthful” view of reality, which are often ideological. My work keeps this ideological message with a political tendency, keeping certain “autonomy of art” claiming to be an

³ Max Weber. The Esthetic Sphere in Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions. 1991. Reprinted from the 1915 Max Weber's Essays in Sociology, edition by H & H, Gerth and C. Wright Mills, London, 1991. Page 344.

essential quality not to be compromised by “sociological categories”. A social class can consciously or unconsciously “serve as mediators” between the social facts (of the production of art and culture) and the mass of the population; they create the ideological justification for social practice. For this reason culture is regarded as a whole way of life within which visual images such as painting, photographs, television, etc. are the elements of a network of communication.

The future of the discipline of art history in its critical forms, that is, those concerned with crisis and the resolution of crisis, will be closely related to the development of the concepts and metaphors of my artwork to the analysis of social, political and ideological features of life.

INFLUENCES

Modernism was an important part of the art history because, during that era, the paintings had an effect on society. The aesthetic guidelines still inspire and influence many artists during that time. Political leaders of modernity also championed reason as the source of progress in social change, believing that reason can produce a first and egalitarian order.

The major movements and event of modernity are “democracy”, industrialization, science, and capitalism. "Also, it is a movement of cultural differentiation, co-modification, urbanization, bureaucratization, and rationalization, which together have contributed to the modern world."⁴ The predominant characteristics of modernism are an optimism regarding technology, belief in the uniqueness of the individual, creativity, and originality. A favoring of abstract modes of expression over narrative, historical, or political content in art; with an awareness for kitsch in culture and a general awareness for middle-class sensibilities and values.

Modernists signified their allegiance to the new by referring to themselves as “avant-garde”, thinking they were ahead of their time and beyond historical limitations. Modern artists were generally often critical of the status quo and frequently challenged middle-class values.

I feel that my work relies a great deal on the history of American and European art. I feel a strong relation to the Impressionist and Expressionist ideals. The Impressionist's desired to look at the world with new freshness and immediacy was encouraged by photography and by scientific research into color and light on varied surfaces, particularly in open-air settings. They transformed

painting, using bright colors and sketchy brushwork that seemed bewildering or shocking to traditionalists. I identified myself with this movement because paintings made by Monet, Manet, Cassat, Morisot, Corot, Pissarro, Cezanne and Van Gogh attempted to free color and life from purely representational functions and returned to the emotional and symbolic values. Through the impressionist movement you can appreciate certain directions toward the color versus drawing, becoming one of purely optical experience once the theme is developed.

On the other hand, the Expressionist movement has influenced my artwork also. The Expressionism favors artists and their sensibilities rather than nature. Artist's inner lives are potent and their feelings and experiences are the source of their muse. They use medium, form, and subject matter to express their inner lives, expressing themselves vividly so the viewer may experience similar feelings.

I consider my artwork as an extension of the stylistic affinities with the Impressionists, also their infatuation with light, color, and shimmering surfaces as a result of the brushwork. I absorb a wide variety of aesthetic influences from the Impressionists' paintings. But the concept of language in my paintings is linked to the Expressionist's ideals because they embrace art about life and my work presents the daily life of society. Certainly, the Expressionist's devoted the use of distortion and exaggeration for emotional effect. Like my artwork, which has its broadest sense, it can be perceived as an art that raises subjective feeling above objective observation, reflecting the state of mind of the artist rather than images that conform to what we see in the external world. My work is based in the social problems and in the reality of the external world, carrying and expressing the feelings of society that I feel subjectively. In order to speak directly about society and to avoid

⁴ Steven Best and Douglas Keller. Post Modern Theory: Critical Interrogations. Guilford Press, New York, 1991. Page. 3.

materialistic distractions, it is preferable to use my art based on the emotional feelings from people interpreted through the language of color and shapes. Art should reflect the improved and changing social conditions, which promised new potentials and harnessed energy.

Modernism includes more than art and literature. By now, it covers almost all of what is truly alive in our culture. "Modernism criticizes from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized. It seems natural that this new kind of criticism should have appeared first in philosophy, which is critical by definition, but as the nineteenth century wore on, it entered many other fields. A more rational justification had begun to be demanded of every formal social activity and Kantian self-criticism, which had arise in philosophy in answer to this demand in the first place, was called on eventually to meet and interpret areas that lay far from philosophy."⁵

I think that each artist creates its unique language through their vision of life, experiences and also influences who teaches us to value and identify our work to others. As I mentioned before, Impressionists and Expressionists artist, admiring them and learning through them have influenced me. But through my years doing my masters degree, I identified myself with three contemporary painters who are Jennifer Bartlett, Clemente Orozco, and Leon Golub. These last two have contributed to my development and understanding of the political issues that are surrounding us by evoking certain social concerns in their work. Their comments, through their work, on social struggles for power influenced me to make a reflection of what is happening in our society today. Both of them shows in their paintings a critical consciousness and self-consciousness reflecting a changed horizon of expectations, a new ideology of personal commitment and social criticality. It is

⁵ Thomas Crow. *Modern Art in the Common Culture*. Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 1996. Page 102.

important to say that the most valuable inspiration and influence in creating my thesis work has been the society which have given me “part of their lives” to expressed it in my art.

Jennifer Bartlett influenced the process of my thesis. To appreciate her uniqueness of her artwork, is also to appreciate her expanded repertory of painting styles. Impressionism, Expressionism, Neo-Realism, Minimalism, and sometimes the entire history of modern art seemed to be making a guest appearance in her work, without quite upstaging the host. She summarizes her own ideas as well as her understanding of the nineteenth and twentieth century context in her work. I could appreciate in her work her conceptual and minimalist orientation; their use offered a way to circumvent painting conventions while working with pigment and to follow her strong analytical bent. The cool, gritted surface allowed her to translate any image or pattern into quantifiable daubs of paint.

It is evident that my work has influences from the Impressionism and Expressionism of the Modern Era suggesting apparent fusion between color and a social argument. These are influences that I take, as well, transforming them into my own language, always using the society as a light to illuminate my artwork as an ideological equivalent indicating a desire of a social transformation of this imminent problem: immigration. For this reason the Modernism, Social and Utopian Ideology or projections have been part of my influences in the development of my thesis work.

CREATIVE PROCESS

The past two years has been very productive for me. I have been provided support from many people, studio space, and time to explore, in depth, the principles of painting such as use of color, surface signature and other formal aspects of painting. My thesis work is representative of my continued effort to develop a vocabulary or a visual language using the painting as my personal signature.

Is interesting to put in perspective the fact that my thesis was started with a few sketches, sketches that were transformed during the process and development of the final results of my artwork. During the process of any type of work, we as human beings are always learning. I learned during the process of creating my artwork from my painting professors, newspapers, classmates, and books and also through the people that I have been interviewing since the summer of 1997. I got so involved in this social problematic that I felt the necessity to create an escape to this situation. For this reason, one of my sketches was my self-portrait, *Spiritual Immigration*, which was done to provide me that escape route I was looking for. This escape is achieved through my painting.

All my paintings were created in no particular order. I worked on them, simultaneously, going back and forth between one painting and another. Although each painting provided me with a different feeling, this “method” allowed me to obtain a better understanding of the final result I was looking for.

My creative process is based on social and self-experiences with the dualism of the technical and expressive aspects. This is my particular approach to painting. Another personal approach of my

creative process is the spontaneous act of making art attributable to sensitivity and receptivity. This aspect can be appreciated in my painting *Through the Sea*. In this artwork, the colors were an encounter of values, surfaces, and shapes, lines and spaces that together completed an overall picture of many experiences.

Before I painted on most of my canvases, I used to draw first the siluet with a pencil for later applying the paint. But it was in one painting, *Through the Sea*, where I explore different aspects of lien, shape, and color that allowed me to paint directly with oil on the canvases utilizing no pencil at first. This provided me a new dimension and freedom about the process of creating an artwork.

During the past two years, I experimented with acrylics, oils, modeling paste on canvas and maisonite, but the one medium I felt most comfortable with was oil on canvas. The oil provides me the opportunity and freedom to mix color on the canvas, giving me a sensation of fluidity. You can paint with the pleasure and freshness that only oils can provide. I say there is freedom when I paint with oils because the acrylic dries faster and does not provide me the sensation of fluidity and continuity that oil gives me. This aspect is very important since I work with all my paintings at the same time and the freshness of the oil is always there even if I did not work on a particular painting for couple of days.

The color of my work has its own language, providing symbols to the viewer of my subject matter. I use the color as a “dialect” of expression. It is interesting to see the “diversity” of colors that I handle in my thesis work. My colors might express depression, oppression, sadness, happiness, hope, passion, and many more feelings expressed as a general and self-created language of color symbols. The vocabulary of color has a powerful effect on perception by itself. I think that

color is fundamental to life; it is a visual stimulus that nourishes our soul. The spectrum of color gives the artist certain freedom to create a unique language.

Scale is another important aspect of my work. The perception of different scales is the first notion that the viewer has when looking at my paintings. I have “small”, “medium” and “large” paintings that evoke different feelings to the viewer. The differentiation of scales can produce different reactions on the viewer in terms of space and possessive control of these scales. I believe the “small” paintings might suggest the viewer and the artist a certain control when compared to the “larger” pieces of artwork. Larger canvases tend to intimidate the viewer because the painting is not in a “human perspective” which is unpredictable and can not be handled by them. This is seen in one of my paintings, *Through the Sea*, where the painting is composed of small canvases each measuring 8” x 10”. While painting each canvas, I could handle them and “control” them but once they were placed together on the wall to form the entire artwork, I “lost” control of the canvases.

In the past two years, not only have I experimented with materials and processes but also I have developed an aesthetic and conceptual way of thinking that I am comfortable with. Each painting carries some kind of experiments, ideals, reflections and the most important thing of all: passion. Passion is essential to life; it is more than inspiration. It is a force, in a good sense, which provides the impulse in our life.

PAINTINGS

THROUGH THE SEA

One of the most incredible cases involved a boat that was so overcrowded... They ran into bad weather and a wave toppled them. Fourteen people died, I think, but many more have not been found [and are presumed dead]. Among the dead were an entire family – mother, father, two daughters, and a grandmother – who drowned. The only member of the family saved was a fourteen-year-old girl... This is a very sad story that the world, I think, does not want to believe.⁶

For centuries, thousands of people, unable to emigrate through legal channels have left their countries clandestinely looking for political stability and economic opportunity. The painting entitled *Through the Sea* is the effort of many people who help me through testimonies and points of view in the development of this artwork. Many people from different countries such as India, Peru, Venezuela, Hong Kong, Puerto Rico, Brazil, United States, Dominican Republic, Spain, Turkey, Italy, Saudi Arabia and many others were involved in the creation of this piece. In some cases, these people were immigrants themselves but in other cases, they provided me with their point of view or perception of this situation that is still affecting our society.

To develop the concept of this painting, it is important to mention that the people that I interviewed were given the opportunity to talk about immigration to any part of the world but most of them addressed their comments based on the people who immigrate to the United States. This is the theme surrounding this painting: the immigration to the United States using the sea as their

⁶ Carmen Hernandez – translator. Interview with Sonia Gonzales who worked in 1982 with the Marielitas from Cuba. Miami, August 1997.

vehicle. Moreover, I relate to immigration through its historical and spiritual aspect, not in religious terms, but as an ideal. Finally, I transformed people's thoughts and testimonies into a visual and tangible painting I mixed different dialogues into one piece reaching 133 paintings each measuring 8" x 10". I could have continued creating more paintings since I received more input from many people, but timing was an issue in the development of my thesis. Some of these ideas were late to be transformed into canvases but they will be placed inside this thesis as a means of inspiration. My motivation was to keep creating small paintings until this problem, immigration, disappears. This is my way of protest against this social issue, but this is an unrealistic thought, which will never end.

"Immigration is an issue of continuing concern for Americans."⁷ "We are torn between the belief that America, land of opportunity, will offer even greater opportunities in the future for us and for others, and the fear that these opportunities that attracted our forefathers are no longer unlimited."⁸ "Over the past two centuries, Americans have vacillated between welcoming immigrants and keeping them out."⁹ I believe that the world was created for all of us without physical boundaries to restrict our right to leave a community and enter another. People, who leave their countries rafting, are people who are unhappy with their way of life, by necessity or obligation, by economic need or also to "escape" a problem that probably the political system of their country does not provide solution. During my research about this theme, I realized that many immigrants move to the United States because this is the country of opportunities, where the "American

⁷ Pastora San Juan Cafferty, Barry R. Chiswick, Andrew M. Greeley & Teresa M. Sullivan. The Dilemma of American Immigration beyond the golden door. Transaction Inc., New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1983. Page 3.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Dream” can be possible. There is no political system in the world (democracy, socialism, communism, etc.) that provides the complex necessities that the human being demands.

Immigration, especially in modern times, is a major symptom of basic social change. In most countries, vast movements of the population accompany industrialization from farms to towns, between towns within the same country and also between countries. These migrations attained greater numerical importance at the turn of the last century in Europe and North America, while in the newly developing countries of Africa, Asia and South America, this process is still vibrant on a large scale today.

Through the Sea is a special painting for me because is a result of the collaboration of many people and, again, without them this artwork would not exist today. I have never worked with the viewer so close while doing an artwork before, laughing, understanding and in some cases crying with them while listening to their memories that this theme evoked. It is more important to me because through my dialogue with them, I was able to transform their realities into an abstract way of appreciation for the sea. As a vehicle of immigration, I wanted shapes and colors to manifest in each painting, keeping the rhythm of waves in the sea. Moreover, I wanted to show and be able to appreciate through the colors and shape a journey through the world.

Through the abstraction of my technique, colors, and shapes in this painting, I was able to migrate with the immigrants to different cultures. The colors and shape where able to transform the history into metaphors and similes. Abstract art, emphasizing visual properties, which as noted previously, can only by metaphoric leap refer to attributes beyond the “act” of painting, is not immediately concerned with the problem of “unreal representations; unreal in the sense of a projected reality.

Color has properties that make your perception of it vary in different circumstances. When I started to do this painting I did not know what the final result would be. I did not have a visual image in my mind of the final result of the painting since most of the ideas in my mind were a group of colors, hues, values, shapes and chromes all mixed together. I interacted with many independent colors in this painting. The subjective feelings and psychological reactions provided by the colors are part of the theme and artistic experience presented.

This painting also evokes the interaction between the mind and the eye, keeping not only a mere optical illusion but also a brain function. Perception is very much a part of the arts and arts rely on perception. There are relationships between color, shape, and texture that dominate perception. Colors can speak to us so personally and powerfully, keeping some spiritual level to us through our personal perception. These paintings have a tendency toward “simplest” and “complex” shapes, handling visual patterns who reflects differences in the successive stages of mental development. "The artist's privilege is the capacity to apprehend the nature and meaning of an experience in terms of a given medium, and thus to make it tangible."¹⁰ Listening to many people talking about this painting, provided me the feeling of accomplishing my goal: to successful in creating a painting that will provide its idea and meaning through its theme, its approach and visual perception.

As I mentioned before, I was not sure what the final result of this artwork, after joining the 133 paintings together, would be. I started with a small plan, a sketch, but throughout the entire process I varied the initial plan to accommodate the flow of new ideas. I created each small painting based on the mood and the input I gathered daily either from the interviews I performed or reading the

¹⁰ Rudolf Arnheim. Art and Visual Perception: A psychology of the Creative Eye. New Version, University of California Press, Los Angeles, California, 1993. Page 169.

answers to the question I had distributed. Also, the knowledge and ideas I had about this theme gave me a palette of ideas to work with. I wanted that the colors and shapes in each painting would run like a heartbeat through the entire piece. I wanted to keep certain rhythm with the colors and shapes “imitating” the distinguished rhythm of the sea. At the same time, I wanted to provide the visual perception of travel by evoking certain “temperatures” of different countries.

Technically, I fusion different styles in this painting such as pointillism, minimalism, Impressionism, Neo-Realism, Rayonism and Abstract Expressionism. These styles were approached as a visual perception from written or listened point of views. *Through the Sea* is conceived as a conversation, through the paint, about the immigration theme. The viewer is able to appreciate styles, lines, colors, lengths, and situations either looking at each canvas separately or as a collage of 133 canvases.

Each color has been applied purposely, according with each statement. I knew when I was interviewing people, that the development of this artwork would create certain “controversy” between the statements and the way I expressed these statements throughout the painting. If it was hard to show the statements word for word, imagine how hard it was to express them through lines and colors. I worked in a symbolical way using perception and sensibility to achieve my goal. For example, I met this person from Bloomington, Indiana who told me that the sea had no meaning for him and his statement was represented with a canvas painted in white. Answers like this one were easy to represent literally. Another example is seen with the testimony of a Cuban who left Cuba towards Miami, in a raft, looking for his family but always having in his mind the desire to someday return to Cuba once it is free from the claws of communism. His last memory from Cuba was leaving, at 5:30 in the morning, on a beautiful sunrise from a beach full of palm trees. I applied

yellow in representation of the sunrise and green shapes in representation of the palm trees to create an illustration of his statement.

One time, I met in Puerto Rico, two sisters, which were immigrants from the Dominican Republic, ages seven and twelve respectively when they left their country. These two girls left their country in a raft with many more people looking for a better tomorrow. Today these girls are twenty five and thirty years of age, and the only thing these ladies remember about their last minutes in their homeland was the sound of their mom saying: "Don't worry. You will be fine. Your aunt will take care of you. You will be able to eat well and get dress. I will be praying for you everyday." In order to represent this sad story, I had to return back to my childhood. To portray this story I used primary colors, painting with my fingers, as a little girl would have done it; establishing the connection with color, shapes and techniques.

Most of my ideas, during this process, came from a specific question I created and distributed to international people that I had met during this past two years. This question was done in order to gather more ideas while I interviewed other people. The answers were received through the technology of e-mail and Internet. Some of the answers came to me a little late to be able to transform them into canvases but I still used them for the creation of this thesis. The following is the question that was provided to people and some of the answers that were received back during this process.

"Centuries ago, Christopher Columbus utilized the sea as an instrument to conquer the New World: America. Even though he decided to conquer the New World, he was scared of not knowing what would happen to him once he reached the horizon. He was scared of losing his life in a shipwreck or being devoured by one of those legendary sea monsters.

Many People, who immigrate by sea, might carry with them these same myths and fears that were carried by this famous conqueror and his sailors. Even though this journey is long

and full of risks, they decided to go forward with the dream and vision of a free life and the idea of a better future.

How do you perceive the sea as a migratory vehicle to reach the dreams and goals immigrants have?"

"We have heard stories about the discovery of American and how people thought that the world was flat when we were kids. But, even though we have also heard the end of the story about how the discoverers overcame their fear, we end up carrying this myth and respect for the sea as barrier and a challenge. I believe that situations like immigration amplify this effect in people's minds, especially when they are surrounded by nothing but water. In the absence of a change of landscape, people look more into themselves and try to manage the conflict between hope and fear of the unknown." Peter Jancso, Brazil. 1998.

"Growing up I heard the stories of the immigration to the US, UK, Canada and South America of my family from Italy. I have even visited each of the four small Italian towns where my grandparents came from. One of those towns has been abandoned since 1970 and is now dilapidated and overgrown with weeds."

Thinking about the sea as a migratory vehicle, the hardships that awaited my great-grandparents and the general fear of the unknown gives rise to very personal feelings about my family history. For me though, such reflection reinforces two ideas: courage and the conditions in their homeland. To travel to an unknown land on a voyage that was certain to include some hardship without the guarantee of success speaks to the impoverished condition and lack of opportunity many of these immigrants came from. Some opportunity, regardless of the cost, was worth more to them than no opportunity at all. Lastly, the ability to leave family behind and search for a better life they were not guaranteed to find required the courage and bravery of a true pioneer." Richard Sidoli, United States, 1998.

"For me the sea has not been a vehicle of migration but I realize the importance that has represented for those who immigrated by sea. If I would have the necessity to immigrate and had no option but the sea, I would see it as my path to reach my dreams, to come close to what I believe would be the ideal life for me. Of course, there is always the fear of the unknown in every journey, but a dream will overcome any fear. When I think about the sea, I think about loneliness, I wouldn't be able to cope with the fact of getting lost and without food in the middle of the sea, or get killed by one of those sea creatures! When you migrate by sea, there is no signs to tell you where you are going, no one to ask for directions, no stopping places to eat or refill you with food, no shop to fix your boat, no hospitals if you get sick; is only you and your dreams. The sea is for dreamers like Christopher Columbus, or my father in law who emigrated from Mainland China to Hong Kong by swimming with a floatation device for three days, with no food to eat. After trying four times to get to Hong Kong, he finally made it, but every time he couldn't accomplished his migration to Hong Kong he was severely punished back in China. For that reason I thank God for giving us the sea, so I could meet my wife through the accomplishments of my father-in-law's migration to Hong Kong through the sea." Eduardo Hernandez, Puerto Rico; and Lisa Hernandez, Hong Kong, 1998.

"Water symbolizes the matrix out of which all life has come. It symbolizes the unknown, our deepest feelings. When we go through a process of immigration, these elements are playing a key role. We are leaving our country where we first saw life. We are facing the unknown of the new life to come, bringing a bag of mixed feelings of excitement and fear, happiness for the new life and sorrow for what we have left."

I think the immigration by sea brings those elements in a much powerful way than if we do it by air or land. The usually long trip gives us time to think and face our feelings. It can also magnify our fears as we find us alone in the middle of the sea." Patricia Molina, Venezuela, 1998.

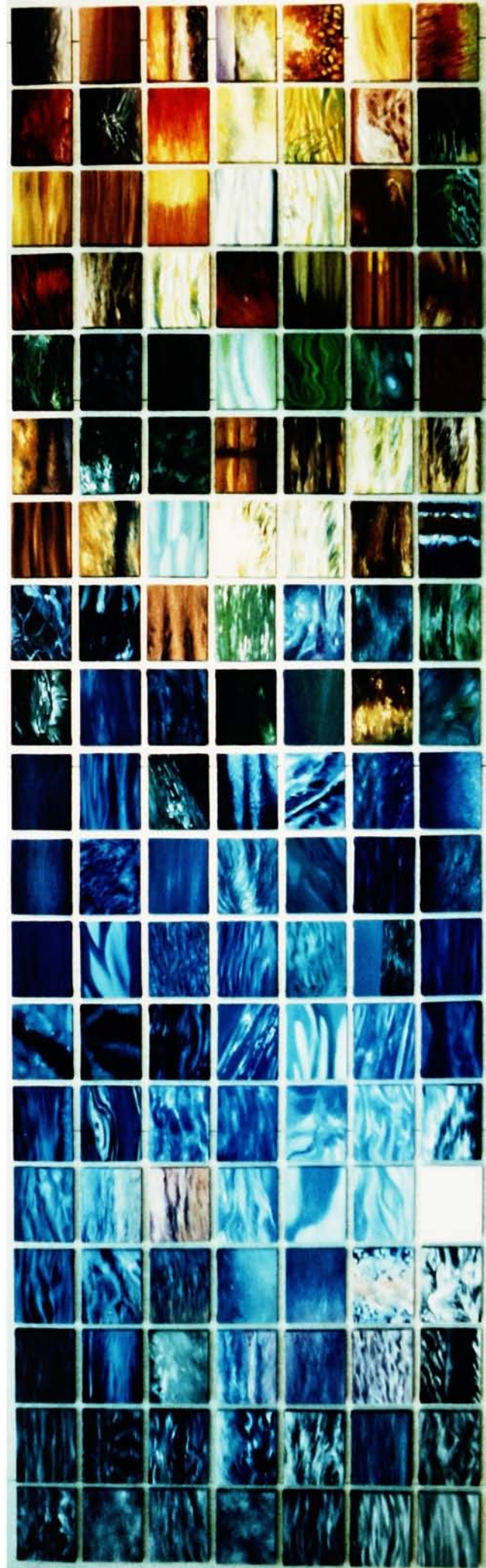
"For me the sea represents strength, nature and freedom, to name a few feelings. To answer better your question, I have to remind you that as Puertorricans, we have a very particular culture. Our culture gyrates around the sea and also around the elements that marks our history. My generation did not grow in a Puerto Rico with extreme poverty. I do not know what it is to "live the day because I do not have a tomorrow". In other words, I do not have to struggle to survive, but I have some certainty in my future. Maybe because of this I have not gotten the necessity to emigrate from my country.

The sea makes me think about my island and provide me the faith and desire to ask God for a long live in my country. I never have gotten the desire of escaping or getting away from my homeland. When I think about the sea as a migratory vehicle, no ideas come to mind since I have never perceived the sea as such. However, I have been in contact with people from other countries that had the necessity to leave their homelands and have used the sea as a migratory vehicle.

For me the sea is the frame of my own reality, of my homeland that due to its great beauty and my own circumstances has all my goals and dreams. I can say that the sea is not a migratory vehicle to reach my dreams but I can say that it has my dreams." Carlos I. Silva, Puerto Rico, 1998.

"The sea has been the principal vehicle of migration between the old and the New World. It is the method of 'transition', powerful and flat, immense and dangerous, but at the same time full of hope and renovation because in that transition comes the reflection. What have we done? What can we do? Who are we? Who can we be? In that transition process we clean ourselves, we leave our sorrows, errors and other actions that we may be sorry about in order to find a better life but not in our place of destiny but in ourselves. It is in that migratory experience, which the water is the means of transition, where the real change lies, the second chance to grow like real human beings reaching the realization and happiness that we are looking for.

Of course, the transition process is also painful since not only the bad is left behind but also many beautiful things, unforgettable moments, and love. Sometimes families other times friends which we leave behind in order to achieve the ideal of the immigrant, the desire to be and have a better live." Alejandro Fernandez, Mexico, 1998.



ESCAPE

In this painting, I used a symbolic tittle for a symbolic representation. This painting is an expression of two different methods of migration using a “boat” as a vehicle to get to their dreams. There is something about the way people make things in a time of crisis and desperation that produces “objects” which are obviously more than functional.

We can appreciate on the left side of this painting, a rickety boat that the Cuban “balseros” used to travel through the adversities of the sea. Homemade raft using tractors tire tubes, wood, and rope to become rafters in search of freedom. On the right side of the painting, a wooden boat similar to those used by Dominicans to migrate to Puerto Rico and Miami can be appreciated. Between both images, a wooden oar is presented which is a basic and important element in finally reaching their freedom. The oar was made out of wood, made out of two parts, and attached with some nails. As the immigrants do when manufacturing their own rafts, I immerse myself psychologically and physically in the creation of this oar. The oar is finally placed against the wall between the two boats to give a visual balance to the painting.

The process of this painting has been measured to create lines that run throughout the canvas. The intention to use four small canvases measuring 7” x 11” each, was to give the viewer certain relation between the image represented and the size of the canvas with certain sarcasm and irony about the rafts. The relation of the image representation and the canvas size is that immigrants tend to travel in crowded rickety rafts not stable and sturdy enough to survive the trip. The sarcasm presented here is the dismal size of each boat, almost like boat toys, the way we see these boats but not the way the immigrants see them, as the vehicle to their dreams and freedom.

The image is divided to give the sensation that through these boats, their lives are divided. This may be because they left family and friends in their countries behind that they will probably never see again. Also, the separation of color is meaningful. You can appreciate very clearly the blue, yellow, black and white colors together with the “real” colors of the boat and the ocean. In the same painting I mixed cool and warm colors, in a radical way, to express this radical subject matter. For example, the blue color is used to represent the water and the sky that is surrounding the boat through the entire journey. Moreover, the blue represents the coldness the immigrants feel by risking their lives. On the other hand, the black and white color on the left-hand side painting represents my desire that this situation may be in the past, like an old silent movie of the 1940’s. The black and white is also powerful and quite colors for me. These are strong colors, which help me portrait the strong spirit of these people who travel through the sea risking there lives for a better future.

On the right-hand side of the painting, the use of yellow and bright pigments evokes the desire to look forward to a new life, to a new sunrise every day. Moreover, it represents the Caribbean sun burning the immigrant’s body throughout their journey. This bottom canvas of this section of the painting uses typical or normal colors to illustrate the image. This is the other dimension of the reality or normality of the situation, which is represented through the use of the colors.

Finally, the colors used throughout the painting are also used in the oar to make it part of work, representing the culmination of the immigrant’s feelings. The oar is identify as an emotional content and “tangible symbolism”, giving another view to the compositional encounter. The oar was incorporated as a new “optical experience” inside the rest of my artwork. This provides certain minimalism, emphasizing the effects on the painting of its relief and contours. I did not want the

viewer to focus all his attention on the oar, I just wanted to make it part of the painting. For this reason I placed it in between the two figures and made it part of the artwork. For me, the oar represents part of the Cuban's and Dominican's culture. Through the spontaneous brushstrokes, structure of lines, balance and colors, this painting reveals two cultures who have been escaping from their countries in lieu of a better social and political future.



FINALLY I AM HERE!

The painting, *Finally I am here!*, contains an emotional connection between nature and my ideals. The appreciation of a fragmented landscape is one full of wishes together with physical and emotional struggles.

My first intention with this painting was to show the viewer another way used by humans to migrate: crossing country boundaries. During this process, my interest and appreciation for Mother Nature increased immensely. As I developed the painting, I realized that what I was doing was not a mere representation of a landscape. I was turning toward something more meaningful inside the scope of my theme. I reject the process of appropriating a piece of land, in other words, the appropriation of a country's geography. I reject such appropriation because it brings consequences between countries such as wars and inside countries such as poverty, oppression, corruption and many other unsatisfactory situations the society should not experience. Such appropriation turns society into a more materialistic one, losing the human beings their spirituality. My way of expressing such problems is through a landscape, activating the intensity of light, colors, and shapes. For me it was interesting and fulfilling to see and feel the duality between what I was doing and what I wanted to finally see in the painting. It was a long process, from fall to spring quarter, of emotional struggle to find myself as an artist in relation to the painting.

First, I wanted a panoramic view of a landscape. This is the reason why I chose to work with a canvas measuring 88" x 32". I wanted to recreate the immensity seen by the immigrant minutes before they physically cross that boundary to their freedom. Second, the variety of colors provides certain nostalgia and mystery. Finally, the fragments throughout the entire painting, rectangles and

windows, are created to capture the attention of the viewer. These fragments have their own vocabulary as minimal portraits of the land representing my new approach of painting landscapes.

I believe that the outward appearance of nature is but the shell of a deeper and richer inside world that I wish to understand. I also know that the forms of art are in their infinite relationship charged with profound meanings. What we carry away from our experiences, often lives in ourselves as memories, more intensely and eloquently than that which we actually see.

I have an enormous attraction for nature. Its variations in colors and shapes are amazing. To create this painting I did a lot of research with photographs from books and magazines but the major source for my inspiration were the different landscape I carry in my mind. My memories and nature itself served me as my primary inspiration.

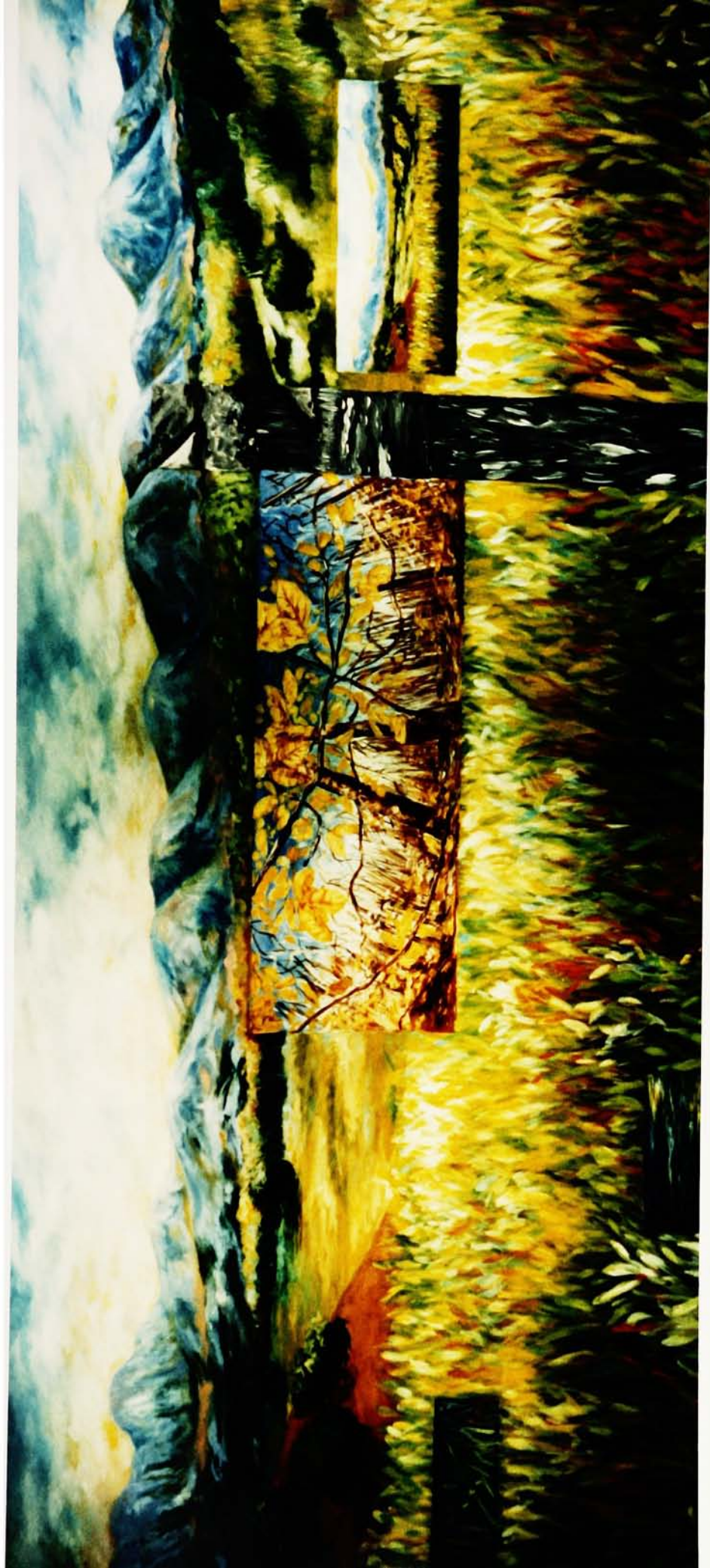
The medium utilized, oil on canvas, have its own contributions to the expressiveness of this artwork. The handwriting of the colored brushstrokes can inspire different feelings. The vague and the forceful, monotony and brilliance, vibrant coloring and calmness, opaque density and spacious transparency, all of these unlimited and indescribable possibilities in the painting speak to us with an endless variety of meanings.

The palette is an instrument that is capable of producing melodic and harmonious sounds. Each color has a certain light intensity in relationship with each other. The kind of orchestration possible by mixing and juxtaposing colors and feelings exploring the shifts between luminosity and opacity which together creates new harmonies. More than one color, it is a light intensity produced by setting a relationship between a whole family of colors. This landscape shows a bright palette

characteristic of the Impressionists with the tendency to unify the composition by focusing in the value of the colors and working in a nuance range of warm and cool tones.

The combination and juxtaposition of the “entire” landscape, with the fragments or rectangles interpreting the essential and poetical spirit of the landscape, had led to make stronger the interest with both lines and colors. The technical manipulation of both lines and colors, present certain Impressionists tendency. I chose to use the freedom of expression that only oil can provide me, dictated only by the personal dialogue which emerged between the work and my internal response to each image of this painting.

This painting is not only a reflection of my intense moments of self-psychoanalysis, but it is also a conscious effort to integrate this experience with life.



THE HOPE OF A METAMORPHOSIS

The history of the 20th century is in large part a record of wars, violence, and atrocities. In many nations, such things are directed to their own citizens and can be seen more dramatically in national and ethnic conflicts.

The Hope of a Metamorphosis, a painting composed of four canvases measuring 36" c 48" each, recreates windows as part of a house. The house symbolizes my soul and my perception of the world that surrounds me. One canvas portrait criminality and another shows the immigrant's view to his defection from his country. A third canvas portraits the struggle for peace and the desire to extinguish poverty. The last canvas shows the obstruction of freedom. In these paintings you can see some of the public and private behavioral gestures of the human being acting in real time in reactive scenarios. Moreover, you can read certain social aspects immigrants have encountered through history. The figures in these paintings are in search of their destiny, a destiny that they are desperately searching for. They are victims of their individual destiny implied by modernization.

These painting are a measure of the contemporary reality that society does not want to see but it is still latent in our world today. This reality was created on four canvases where the images are portrait through a recreation of windows portrait through wooden lattices. The images are painted as if they were on the outside of the house: the world. The house is represented by the lattice that I mentioned before and by two important elements: a chair and a table, which played and important role in the meaning of this painting. To add to the "inside world", I created a 2" x 5" painting which is placed on top of the small table. This painting keeps my hope about this social situation alive by portraying a landscape, a place to be, as a spiritual Shangri-La.

This artwork, more than showing spaces organized chronologically, it shows a limited palette in black and white. As I mentioned before, I used the black and white colors to represent the wish that the theme and situations portrait would be part of the past. Like the old films, programs, photographs, and commercials made in the 30's and 40's that are now consider part of our history. I think that understanding believing and appreciating the colors in this work is very subjective. The colors utilized in the other paintings are lacking in this one providing a psychological transition between each other.

For me the black and white colors are tones that show certain "power". The "power" found in these colors is the power that I perceive is inherent in the political systems that govern the world and are the obstacle in making the immigration problem disappear. For this reason, these colors have given me a spiritual experience. Moreover, the combination of black and white, which translates into gray and provides another value to the color, contributes to the tone of the painting in harmonious juxtaposition. Through the black and white and its different combinations, I created interesting light and shadow effects providing certain mystery, melancholy and many other feelings to the viewer which find their own language of expression through their perception of what they are seeing.

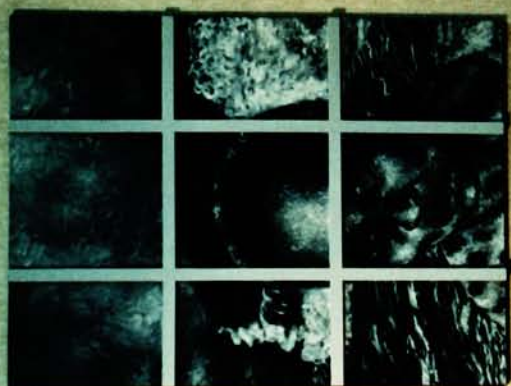
I applied the paint in the form of marks strictly planned and in progressed combinations. I manipulated the concentration of marks with the combination of colors to create some light, shadows, and chiaroscuro effects providing the sensation of volume. I achieved the sensation of volume by working with the gradation of the black and white and the manipulation of my brushstroke. Manipulating my brushstrokes was a little complex but at the same time very stimulating and challenging. I agree with Jennifer Bartlett when she says that her mathematical

system is not important by itself; it's only the function to provide a means of getting the work done. In other words, the benefits came from the physical act of applying the paint not from the system utilized.

The small canvas lying in top of the table reveals my ideals and my hope that the society can attain its metamorphosis. It represents a little hope, the hope of change that although little it is still latent in our lives. The painting was done utilizing a green palette symbolizing hope or at least the hope found in my soul.

The wood lattice, the windows, were painted in gray color to make a contrast with the outside and the inside as with the big canvases to create different atmospheres and environments. The chair and the table, which were done by me, were painted black so that they would not create any competition with the paintings. I wanted the furniture to be part of the work and not another artwork that would compete and take away from the meaning I wanted to portray.

Iconographically, these pieces reveals part of my perception of some of the raw realities of the society we live in. The three dimensional elements allows the viewer, with my consent, to get inside of my "perceptive space" and see the world as I see it. I allow the viewer, for a moment, to be part of my psychic so that they could interpret, just as I did, these problems of society.



SPIRITUAL IMMIGRATION

The piece, *Spiritual Immigration*, shows my desire to migrate to another place or status in life. The concept of the self-portrait has been worked before with certain utopian thoughts that for me involve magic, dreams and fantasies which perhaps are deeply embedded inside all of us.

The intention to capture and include myself as part of my thesis was to show that I have also this desire to “escape” to other places or other status of life. I am able to achieve this escape through the fantasy of shapes and colors. The painting’s technique enhances the sense of urgency and also could look like it was done “automatically” but it was not. The brushwork was a result of a dynamic sketching technique. Here the touches are smaller and the marks more subtle interwoven to create a brushstroke evoking toughness. The strokes in the background evokes the textures of foliage and introduces continuous variations of colors such as greens, blues, whites and soft pinks suggesting light and shade effects. But even in the figure, the surface varies throughout, with soft, feathery touches describing the skin and constantly shifting tones of pink, purple, green, blue, and yellow in order to reflect the shadows and reflect light on the figure. In this painting I evoked the play of natural light through an active brushstroke in order to make it different in color value.

This painting reveals certain “romanticism” in the way that I used my technique and colors. I utilized small marks of colors as a basic unit of brushwork in order to control, as precisely as possible, the quantities of each color needed to achieve the effects desired. The blue and purple tones suggest the shadows of the skin. The warmer colors create the reflection of the sunlight both on the figure as well as in the foreground. The predominant green palette could suggest not only the

green card of the immigrants but also hope. As it can be appreciated, I tend to work with vivid colors, intense light and broken brushstrokes which recalls the works of the impressionists.

Through my portrait, I express my determination and ambition for a better future not comforting to social and political norms. I am performing a self-analysis of my surroundings, expressing myself as the voice of protest for men and women, black and whites, rich and poor. Moreover, this is the expression of my body and mind as a means to transpose myself to other emotional or “spiritual” places. My work more than expresses my unconformity with cannons established by society and with the physical and spiritual boundaries faced by the human beings.

Through this painting I also bring a possibility. The possibility that artists can change the world through their artwork and ideas. More than representing myself, I am portraying the artists, which are representing through a female and created by a female, which throughout the history of art have been rejected and ignored. The size of my portrait, 58” x 88”, suggests the power that artists have in our society but moreover it represents the power female artists can achieve in the same society.

My portrait does not divorce itself from the social conditions of the time. It implicitly presents that we, the artists, can provide our own opinions and ideas about the socio-political issues of our times.

Finally, the iconography of my portrait evokes certain utopian voice. Humanity has longed for a perfect world, one in sharp contrast to whatever its particular surrounding reality happens to be. I believe that everyone in this world has its particular utopian views, and one of my views is to be able to change the history of humanity, the history made by men for men, to one of equal rights and justice for all.



CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of my thesis work was to explore the personal and external interpretations of a major socio-political issue of our society: immigration. I used my art to express my internal concerns about society. Through my artwork I am trying to carry a message of awareness of this social problems to the viewer and the possibility that we, the artists, can do to improve the world.

The contemporary art in this century is providing us with the opportunity to develop ourselves as much as we can as artists, without limits and boundaries. I prefer the art that allows the viewer to open their minds, looking at the realities of life, and that evaluates, educates, and conducts society, creating the leaders for our future.

My search for these social issues and the search for color, using three dimensional elements and different size of canvases have given me a deeper understanding of myself and the motivating sources of my art.

As a humanist, I worked with the sensibility that characterizes my social concerns and necessities. I believe that the artist's personal vision of reality have a social power which makes an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness. We are cultural workers and art is needed to nourish the roots of our culture struggling with passion day by day, pursuing what we want as member of society and as artists.

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